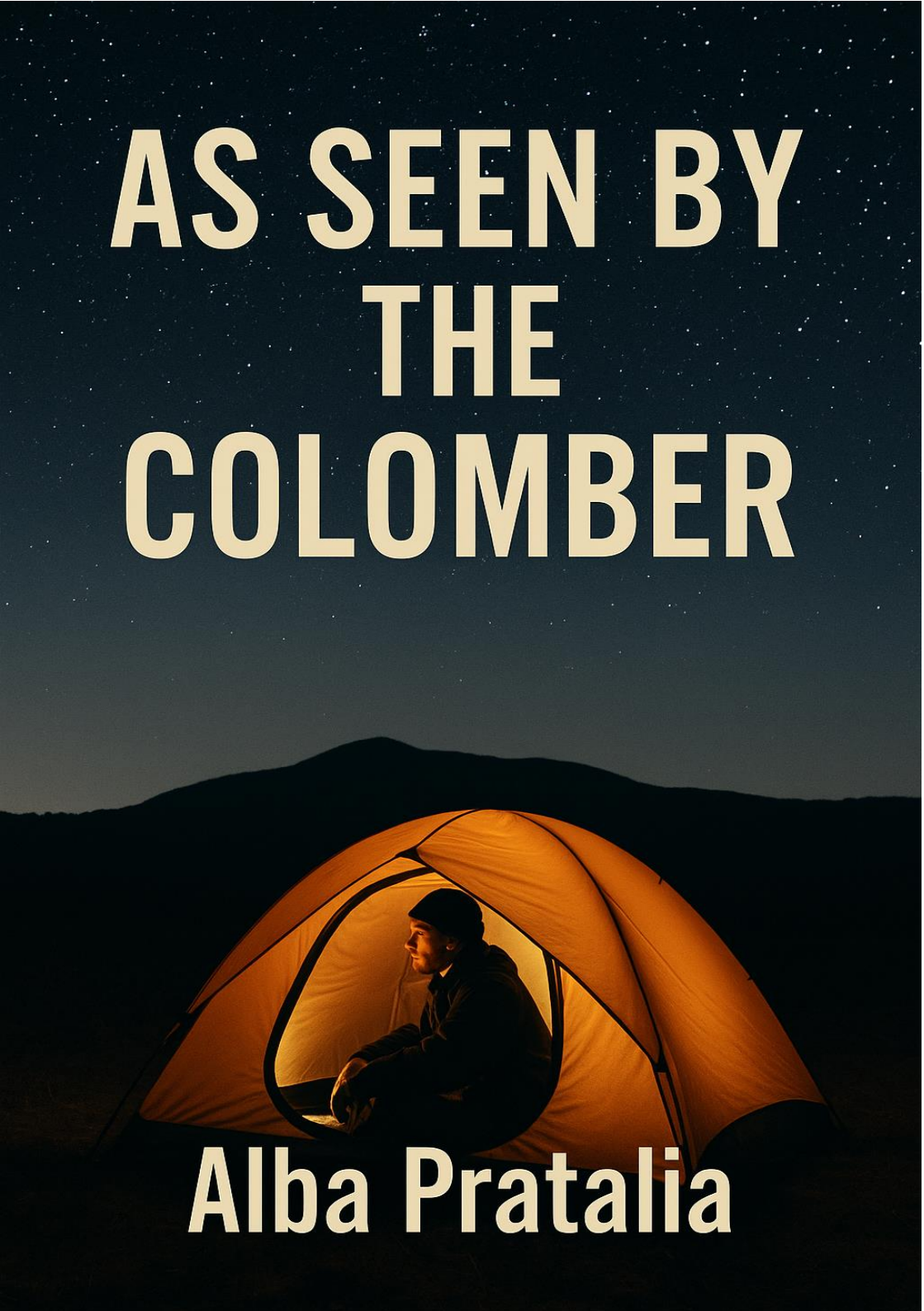


AS SEEN BY THE COLOMBER

A person is sitting inside a glowing orange tent at night. The tent is illuminated from within, casting a warm light. The person is looking out of the tent opening towards a dark landscape with mountains in the background under a starry night sky.

Alba Pratalia

AS SEEN BY
THE COLOMBER

By Alba Pratalia

Chapter 1

The stars pierced the clear sky like sparks from a campfire against the plastic sheet of a tent. The man wasn't sleeping. He never did, not really. He lay on his side, cheek on a folded jacket, one boot still on. The other foot stuck out of the sleeping bag like a piece of forgotten meat. His breath fogged up the inside of the tarp. He wiped it absently with the back of his hand and stared out.

Somewhere ahead—beyond the ridges, past the lights of a half-dead truck stop—a man had walked into a diner and ordered soup. Yesterday. Maybe the day before. The waitress had remembered him. Said he didn't speak. Wrote the word *lentil* on a napkin.

The man in the tent chuckled. Lentil. Fancy.

He sat up, coughing. His bones cracked like the ice outside. He took a bottle from his pack. Swished the water. Spat. His molars ached. He rummaged in the side pocket and took inventory:

- One strip of antibiotics, expired.
- Two vials of saline, cloudy.
- One butterfly catheter.
- Gauze.
- Scalpel handle.
- Four blades.
- Morphine: none.

He licked his chapped lips, pulled out a tin of cold beans, and ate without tasting. The spoon was bent. Everything was bent.

Outside, wind scraped across the frozen soil. The mountains were still a grey whisper in the north. He would walk again today.

The man didn't keep a map. He kept a rhythm. He followed the presence like a smell, a pressure, a kink in his neck. The world bent around that man like a funnel, drawing the hobo inward, step by step, station by station.

He never ran.
He just walked.

Chapter 2

The train had stopped sometime during the night. No whistle. No announcement. Just the quiet thud of metal cooling on metal, and the sudden absence of movement.

The man woke wedged between two pallets of tires, his back fused to rubber like a barnacle to rock. He waited for sound—footsteps, dogs, voices. Nothing. Only the rustle of mice chewing plastic.

He crawled out the open freight door into a yard overgrown with weeds and iron. The tracks were red with rust. A line of cars stretched into a curve and disappeared. No one watched.

A man had jumped off this train twelve hours earlier. The yard supervisor, a woman in a stained orange jacket, said he limped slightly, carried no bags, and thanked her for nothing. She remembered him because he left a half-eaten apple on the bench outside the office.

The man found it. The bite mark was small, even, without canines. A bureaucrat's bite.

He pocketed the apple core.

There was a gas station nearby, closed since the flood. He walked there. On the wall, someone had written in chalk:
Too late, always too late.

He grinned. “Getting cocky,” he muttered to himself. “Writing poetry now.”

Inside the convenience store, most of the shelves were bare, except for dog food and sugarless gum. He took both. A man needs fiber.

He boiled water in an old tin mug over a portable stove stolen two counties back. While it heated, he took out the roll of gauze from his pack, unwound it, and checked the contents hidden inside: six ampoules of stimulant, glass syringe, packet of glucose, and a folded printout of an article titled *Survival of Peripheral Nerve Endings Under Repeated Thermal Trauma*.

The water bubbled. He dropped in a pinch of dog food. Stirred. Ate.

He stood and walked.

The road curved north. The sky was the color of drowned cement. Ravens flew ahead. He followed.

In the ditch beside the road, he found a torn receipt from a fast food chain three towns north. Date: yesterday. Order: fish sandwich, no tartar. He held it up, sniffed it. "Lentil and fish," he said. "Fucking epicurean."

He tucked the receipt into his coat pocket. Another relic. Another breadcrumb.

He walked until his feet blistered, then walked more. At a burned-down toll booth, he lay flat behind the concrete stump and slept with one eye open and both boots on.

The sky above was full of brittle stars. They said nothing.

Chapter 3

The road split at a roundabout strangled by weeds. A rusted sign leaned at an angle, pointing to towns that had either moved or died. The man followed neither. He turned into a dirt path gouged by tractor wheels and hemmed by thorn bushes.

A crow hopped across the track ahead, dragging something pale in its beak. It looked at him with one eye, then took flight. The thing it left behind was a piece of shirt fabric, soaked at the edge.

The man squatted and pressed two fingers into the stain. Still damp. He sniffed. Laundry

detergent. Citrus. He laughed. “He washes. The man washes. What a gentleman.”

He walked for six hours, pausing once to piss behind a hay bale and once to pet a dog that wasn't there. It had followed him since the railway yard. A short mutt with no tail and eyes like spoiled olives. It barked only once, then vanished again.

Mid-afternoon, he reached a barn. It leaned like an old drunk against a slope. One side of the roof had collapsed, but the interior was dry. He stepped inside and smelled ashes. Not old ones.

In the corner, a fire pit. Small. Stones arranged neatly. A perfect circle. Next to it: a burnt match, a plastic fork, and the curled peel of a mandarin. The man knelt. Touched the ashes. Warm.

He whispered, “Closer.”

From his coat, he took out a map someone else had marked for him weeks ago. He didn't read it. He only looked at one point—a crude dot on a crude mountain, where all the roads thinned into hairlines and then disappeared.

He tucked it away. He wouldn't need it yet.

He pulled out a nail clipper and began trimming the calluses off his heel, flaking off skin in pale, dry curls. He fed them to the fire pit.

He stayed the night in the barn, wrapped in an old horse blanket that smelled like sweat and mildew.

At dawn, he rose, packed, and left a single spoon behind.

A gift.

Or a message.

The mist was thick, rising from the soil in pale cords. A line of telephone poles walked ahead of him, disappearing into grey.

He followed.

Chapter 4

The rain began before sunrise. Not a storm. Just a steady, relentless curtain. Cold enough to sting. Quiet enough to hear your own bones creak.

The man walked through it without haste. The water ran down his hat, over his collar, into the space between shirt and spine. He never adjusted.

A car passed him once, headlights off, slow. A hatchback, beige, dented. He didn't raise a thumb. The car didn't stop.

He reached a crossroads marked by a chapel the size of an outhouse. Inside, a porcelain Madonna had fallen face-first and shattered. He picked up the largest piece—the forehead and eyes—and turned it over in his hands.

Someone had scrawled something on the back
in biro:
He went west.

The man pocketed it. “Thanks, lady,” he said.

By mid-morning, he came to a ditch where the mud was pressed in the shape of shoes. Deep heel prints, turned outward. The left foot dragged. There were scraps of toilet paper in the brush. He knelt, brushed one clean. Still smelled faintly of lemon-scented soap.

He sighed with admiration. "Hygienic. Dignified. Limping like a bishop."

He lit a cigarette and smoked half of it, then ate the other half for warmth.

He crossed a field of mustard, now all grey stalks. In the center, he stopped and unrolled a sheet of wax paper. Inside: a set of images clipped from a safety manual. Diagrams. Fire injuries. Step-by-step drawings of wound treatment, in six languages. He studied them for ten minutes under the drizzle.

Then he folded the paper, placed it in a plastic sleeve, and slipped it back into his coat.

Near evening, he found a train tunnel. Abandoned. Overgrown. The tracks vanished into moss and dripping stone. He stepped inside without lighting anything. His boots echoed.

Halfway through, he stepped on something soft. He crouched. A scarf. Cheap wool. Frayed ends.

Still damp. He pressed it to his nose. No cologne. No perfume. Only sweat. Human.

He tucked it under his arm like a holy relic.

He made camp outside the tunnel mouth, beside a row of blackberries too sour to eat. He built no fire. He just sat, blanket over his knees, muttering something to himself about how God never bothered to patent the rain.

Then he slept, twitching.

A mouse tried to crawl into his coat. He bit it. Not hard. Just enough to prove a point.

Chapter 6

The storm didn't come at once. It rolled in slow—grey first, then wind, then the scent of metal and bruises. The kind of weather that

smells like someone just struck a match on the inside of the sky.

The man welcomed it. Rain washed more than filth. It smeared tracks, confused dogs, leveled the odds.

He crossed a wooden bridge with no railings. Beneath it, a stream gurgled like it was choking on secrets. On the other side, he saw it.

A fire.

Small, almost cold. Just the wet ashes of it. And beside it, an egg carton. Two eggs missing. The others unbroken.

He touched one. Warm. Not hot, not raw from the chicken—but warm. Body-warm. Man-warm.

He didn't smile. Didn't move fast. He simply sat down cross-legged in the mud and peeled a hard-boiled egg someone else had boiled.

He salted it with a packet he found nearby.

"Getting close," he said, chewing.

He walked again when the rain thickened. His boots sloshed. Blisters talked back in Morse. One heel split. He felt it and kept going.

A car passed. He stuck out a hand. The driver didn't stop. A teenage girl in the backseat looked at him with pity.

He winked at her. She turned away.

The dog returned in the afternoon. Wet. Sullen. Carrying a napkin in its mouth. The man knelt and took it gently.

It was smeared with mustard. On it, a note scrawled in block letters: *Last town before the climb.*

He looked at the dog. “You stealing condiments now?”

The dog barked once and vanished into the fog.

The town, when he reached it, was nothing but shuttered windows and dead neon. One bar open. Inside, a man watched a muted television and poured him a drink without asking.

The man sipped. Then leaned forward.

“Tall guy pass through?” he asked.

The barman nodded. “Didn’t drink. Asked for the weather. Left.”

The man nodded. “Did he walk or crawl?”

“Walked,” the barman said. “But stiff. Like something tore in his hip.”

The man chuckled. “We all tear eventually.”

He left two coins, one of them ancient and unrecognizable. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t coming back.

That night, he slept in a shipping container behind the station. He lined the walls with plastic wrap and muttered stories to himself about what comes after knees, and how many bones were in a hand if you were *patient*.

He dreamed of metal. White-hot. Red tips. The smell of burnt cloth. The rhythm of screaming.

In the morning, the fog was gone. The mountain had appeared.

Waiting.

Chapter 7

The mountain had no name. Not for him. Just a shape he'd been circling for months like a drain. It was dark green at the base, slate grey in the middle, bone-colored at the top.

No path, no pilgrims, no markers. Just brambles and switchbacks.

He didn't climb. He *ascended*, like a bad thought rising in the throat.

The trail began behind an abandoned hotel, half-eaten by ivy. He paused by the empty pool. The water was a thick soup of algae and drowned things. A single footprint stained the diving board. Muddy, small, turning left.

He crouched. Took a photo with his mind. Whispered, "Almost."

He followed upward. His boots sank in the moss, slid on the stone. The straps of his pack bit into his shoulders like fingers with opinions.

Halfway up, the fog returned. Not the gentle mist of valleys, but the thick, blind kind that swallows faces and coughs them out stranger.

He passed a tree stripped of bark. Four claw marks ran parallel across the trunk, each one a knife-width apart.

He laid his palm next to them. “Human,” he said. “Panicked.”

He continued.

A shrine appeared—wooden, rotted, leaning sideways like a hanged man. Inside it, a photo of a child and a plastic flower melted by seasons. He didn’t stop. Just nodded once.

Higher, the cold changed. It wasn't wind anymore—it was pressure. Like walking through water.

He found a campsite. Fresh. A circle of stones. Twigs stacked. One half-burnt sausage still skewered on a stick. Teeth marks visible. He touched them. Square. Nervous.

He sat beside it. Pulled a needle from his coat. Injected glucose into the crook of his arm. Laughed as the sugar hit him. "For strength," he muttered. "Not for kindness."

He examined his kit. Inventory unchanged. Except—he pulled out a small glass vial. New. A sedative. Fast. Clean. Gentle.

He stared at it. Then set it aside. "Too early."

As dusk dropped, he built no fire. He wrapped himself in foil like meat and whispered a song

from childhood, something about a cow with two heads and a broken moon.

In the distance, something coughed. Maybe a man. Maybe a deer. Maybe the air, failing.

He smiled.

Tomorrow, he would be closer.
Tomorrow, maybe footprints would bleed.

Chapter 8

The wind had claws now. Not metaphorical ones—*real* ones. It peeled skin. Tore at stitches. It scraped his cheek raw where the scarf had slipped. He didn't notice. Or maybe he did and just didn't register the relevance.

He climbed by instinct. No trail. No plan. Just a pull. As if the rock itself had magnetized his bones.

Around midday, he stopped at a rock shaped like a child curled into itself. He sat on it and unwrapped his lunch: bread turned to rock, cheese turned to paper, and a boiled egg stolen four days back. Still good. He bit into it and found a hair inside. Not his. Blonde.

He grinned with yolk between his teeth. “He’s molting.”

He spit the shell off the edge and watched it fall. Somewhere down there, a fox barked. Or maybe it was laughter.

Above him, the slope steepened. Slate and gravel, slick from frost. He crawled now, fingers bent, knees torn open through the pants. The blood came slow. He welcomed it. It mapped his way back, if he ever needed to return. He wouldn’t.

By afternoon, he reached a flat stretch—a saddle between two teeth of stone. There, he found a thermos. Standing upright. Full. Still warm. Black coffee, burnt-tasting, no sugar.

He drank it.

He drank *all* of it.

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and whispered, “Thank you.”

Then he smashed the thermos against a rock.

The dog came again near dusk. This time it had a bandana around its neck, red and dirty. The man took it gently, like a surgeon lifting a child’s heart. Inside it, tied in a knot, was a matchbook from a local bar. On the cover: *Monte Viso — Ultimo bicchiere prima di salire.*

He lit a match and let it burn down to the tips of his fingers.

The dog watched. Said nothing. Then walked away.

That night he dug a hole in the snow and laid down inside it, covering himself with pine branches and an emergency blanket. His feet stopped throbbing. His mind didn't.

He dreamed of machines, belts snapping, sparks landing on aluminum dust, and seven bodies he couldn't carry.

He woke before dawn.

His tongue was bleeding.

He smiled.

The peak was near.

Chapter 9

The flat stretch looked almost deliberate—like a cruel gift from the mountain. A place to breathe before the final haul. A ribcage of stone, curved and quiet, with enough space to imagine stopping.

The man didn't stop.

He walked with the limp of a man whose boots had become part of his feet. Blood had dried in the seams. Toes fused to wool. He didn't bother anymore. If they came off, he'd keep walking on bones.

Halfway across the plateau, he saw smoke.

Thin. Pale. New.

Not a fire. A cigarette.

The end glowed, then vanished.

He said nothing. Changed direction.

The earth here was dry and cracked, pale like flaked skin. He walked over it like walking over memory. Each step deliberate. A ritual.

He passed a cairn. Small. Stones stacked neatly. One of them was wet. He touched it. Still warm from a hand.

He sat beside it and took out his kit. Laid it open on his knee like a priest unwrapping relics.

- Scalpel, honed.
- Alcohol pads.
- Syringe with cardiac stimulant.
- Gauze.
- Clips.
- Rope.
- Tarp.

He counted each item like prayer beads.

He looked up at the grey sky and said,
“Tomorrow’s the day.”

A crow landed five feet away. Crooked. Scarred.
It stared.

He stared back. “Not yet,” he said. “Come back
when it’s lit.”

The crow didn’t move.

He stood. Walked past it. The crow turned its
head but didn’t fly.

The man found a hollow behind a cluster of
rocks. Dry. Sheltered. Someone had slept here.
Hair on the stone. A long piece. Blonde. Curled.

He picked it up. Wrapped it around his finger.
Tied a knot in it.

He slept there, cross-legged, back against stone,
head tilted just enough to keep his throat out of
the wind.

The stars returned.

Sharper than before.

He spoke aloud: “He’s here.”

The wind didn’t answer.

It didn’t need to.

Chapter 10

Dawn came like a warning: cold, slow, indifferent. No color. Just light that didn’t care where it landed.

The man rose without sound. No stretch. No yawn. His joints didn’t click anymore—they’d fused into silence. He pissed on a flat stone and watched the steam rise like a burnt offering.

Then he walked.

The ground angled upward, subtle at first, then cruel. The trail narrowed into a goat's suggestion of a path. Loose shale rolled underfoot. He slid, caught himself. Slid again.

A smear of blood appeared on a rock. Fresh. Too red to be old, too sharp to be accidental. A hand had touched it. Not fallen—*rested*.

He ran a finger across it. Tasted it. "Hello again."

He climbed for five hours. Ate nothing. Drank from a tin can he found frozen in a stream. The water tasted like rust and tin and bone. He said thank you to no one.

Midway through the rise, he found a sock. The left one. Matched the right he'd kept since Chapter 3. He placed them side by side on a rock and gave them a moment of reunion.

Then he took the right sock back. Left the left one behind. “Balance,” he said.

Higher. Always higher. The trees gave up. Then the grass. Then even the moss stopped trying. Just wind now, and stone, and sky.

Near a jagged outcrop, he found ashes. Recent. Still warm. A fire had been lit, but no attempt made to hide it. In the center of the char was a spoon—melted halfway. Bent like a question mark.

He sat beside it. Took out his last strip of jerky. Sucked it like a toothpick.

He felt it now. The presence. Not ahead. *Around.*

The trail ended.

In front of him, a tent. Green. Camouflaged. Not military issue. Civilian-grade.

It was zipped shut.

He didn't move.

He crouched, reached into his coat, and pulled out a scalpel. Laid it on a flat stone.

He reached in again. Pulled out a vial. Unlabeled. Swirled it. Set it beside the blade.

Then the rope. Then the gauze. Then the gloves. Then the antibiotics. Then the glucose line.

Each object placed with the reverence of ritual.

He stood. Looked at the tent. The fabric fluttered once in the wind.

He said, softly, "Tomorrow."

Then he walked a few feet away, laid down on the stone, and slept with his eyes open.

The dog did not come. The wind did. The crow watched from a crag.

The mountain made no sound.

It was ready.

Chapter 11

The stars faded without ceremony. Just a slow erasure, like breath on a mirror. The sky went from black to iron, then to the dull silver of a surgical tray.

The man stood. Cracked his knuckles. Stretched one calf until the muscle popped. Then he walked back to the tent.

No hesitation. No pause.

He unzipped it.

Inside, curled on a mat, lay a man. Thin. Pale. Awake. Eyes wide open. Didn't speak.

They looked at each other for a full minute. Then the standing man said, "You took your time."

The man on the mat didn't reply. Just swallowed.

The hobo knelt, reached into the tent, and pressed the barrel of a cheap stun gun to the side of the man's neck. There was a *click*, a seizure, and silence.

He dragged the body out like firewood. No struggle. Just weight. Deadweight. But not dead. Not yet.

He pitched a second tent ten feet from the first. Newer. Cleaner. Stolen from a store two provinces back. He laid the body inside, flat.

Then he unpacked his kit.

- Hook.
- Clamp.
- Torch.
- Scalpel.
- Cloth.
- Bucket.
- Alcohol.
- Tape.

He hung a makeshift IV of saline from the pole.
Connected the line. Tapped the bag twice. The
drip started.

He looked down at the unconscious man and
said, “We begin with the left arm. Forearm to
wrist. We’ll see what your nerves remember.”

He lit the torch. Waited for the tip to glow orange. Then red.

He didn't rush. He was precise.

The smell came first—hair, then skin, then that distinct cooked-flesh sweetness. The man hummed an old tune from the factory floor, something stupid about forklifts.

He cut. Peeled. Stopped when the radius showed white.

The other man woke during the third tendon. Eyes fluttered, mouth opened, a sound came out—not a scream, not yet.

The hobo pressed a sponge soaked in saltwater to the wound. The scream came then.

He smiled. "There you are."

He injected a stimulant. The eyes stayed open. Good.

By nightfall, the forearm was flayed to the wrist.
No bone damage. All nerves exposed.

He wrapped the wound with gauze soaked in
antibiotics. Injected morphine. Not too much.
Just enough to keep the heart from rebelling.

Then he closed the tent, sat outside, and
warmed his hands by a small fire made from pine
branches and the man's shredded coat.

He looked up at the sky. The stars were back.

"Six more," he whispered.

Then he laughed. Not loud. Just enough for the
wind to carry.

Chapter 12

The sun rose behind clouds shaped like tumors.
There was no light, just the idea of morning.

The man stirred tea with the same spoon he'd used to dig a latrine. He didn't mind. Everything ended in dirt anyway.

He stood, wiped his hands on his pants, and unzipped the tent.

Inside: the patient. Pale now, skin waxy, lips cracked. Awake. Good. Still there. Still useful.

The hobo checked the IV. Flow was good. He flicked the tube. No air. He pressed a hand to the chest—heartbeat strong, accelerated. Adrenaline was doing its work.

"Today's canvas is the right arm," he said. "Upper quadrant. We'll leave the elbow intact. Sentimental reasons."

He tied a tourniquet. Tight. The bicep bulged like an insult.

He sliced.

This time, he didn't use heat. Just the blade. Slow. Clean. Skin peeled like fruit under pressure. The man below him thrashed once—no more. The restraints held.

Muscle came next. He used a retractor to hold the incision open. Inserted gauze between the layers. Worked down to the humerus. Not a scratch on the bone. He admired that.

At one point, the man bit through his own lip. Blood poured sideways.

The hobo wiped it. "No infections, please. I'm working here."

By midmorning, the arm looked like a cross-section from a textbook—fascicles exposed, nerves twitching like worms under rain.

He injected something near the shoulder. The body jerked. A seizure began. He counted the

seconds. When it stopped, he whispered:
“Nine.”

He wrapped the wound in a sterile plastic sleeve.
Inserted a catheter to drain fluid. Injected more
glucose. Pressed two fingers to the carotid. Still
fast. Still alive.

He sat back, cleaned the blade with alcohol, then
licked the edge.

No blood. He smiled. “See? Professional.”

Outside, the weather had turned. Wind howled
against the rocks. He built a windbreak with
stones and a piece of tarp. The dog came, sniffed
the air, growled once, and left.

He didn’t look up. Just muttered, “Two down.”

He sharpened the scalpel on a whetstone while
boiling a pot of snow. Clean water hissed. He

poured it over his hands, flexed his fingers. Skin cracked. Nails purple.

He watched the tent flap dance in the wind and whispered to it: “You had your chance to die with dignity.”

Then he slept.

His dreams that night were in *x-ray*.

Chapter 13

The morning was thinner than the man remembered mornings could be. Air didn’t fill the lungs—it scraped.

He opened the tent and leaned in. The smell was worse now. Not rot—rot takes time. This was *fresh* suffering. Like metal dipped in milk.

The body inside had curled during the night, despite the restraints. Bones contorted. Muscles spasmed under their gauze corsets. The right arm was swollen, veined in purple.

He checked the IV. Still dripping. Still useful.

He whispered, "Today we dance."

Day Three was the right leg. Below the knee. More mass. More blood. More twitch.

He tightened the restraint around the thigh and lifted the leg like lifting a ham from a butcher's hook. Still warm. Still trembling. Still his.

He hummed an old disco tune and marked the incision line with a charcoal stub. "From ankle to knee, clean and free."

He made the first cut just above the ankle, careful not to nick the Achilles. That was for later. That was dessert.

The scalpel moved steady. Parallel. The flesh parted with a sigh.

This was different than the arms. The thigh muscle fought. The calf bled slow and thick like something unwilling to leave.

The man on the mat screamed once, then tried to swallow his own tongue.

The hobo jammed a rubber wedge in his mouth. “Not yet,” he said. “We’re not even to the tibia.”

Midway through, he cauterized two vessels. The stench caught in his beard. He didn’t mind. He’d smelled worse in bathrooms with motivational posters.

He paused only once—to inject a stimulant directly into the heart line. The body bucked. The eyes opened. Focused.

The hobo smiled. “There you are. Stay with me.”

By late afternoon, the leg was a peeled fruit. Tendons visible, nerves twitching like wire in wind. He left the kneecap untouched. Symbolic.

He wrapped the whole thing in cooling gel sheets. Tied them in place with strips torn from the victim’s own shirt.

Then he cleaned his hands with alcohol. Sat beside the fire.

He took out a notebook. Drew diagrams. Circles. Notes. Wrote one line:
Day Four — left foot & knee — increase sedation window.

The crow came at dusk and dropped a pebble beside him.

He looked up. “You’re late.”

It cawed.

He nodded. "Three down."

Chapter 14

The morning brought snow. Fine, dry, and bitter. It fell in diagonal lines, like slashes across the sky. Nothing settled. The wind wouldn't let it.

The man rose without stiffness. His body had stopped warning him. Pain had become a rumor.

He opened the tent. The smell greeted him like a loyal friend. Flesh, gauze, sweat, ammonia. Fear had its own scent. Sharp. Animal.

He crouched beside the body. Pupils responsive. Breath shallow. The left arm twitched on its own. The right was still a slab of gauze-bound

meat. The leg dripped slowly into a collection pan.

Today was the left foot and knee.

He started with the boot. Removed it gently. The foot inside was blistered, swollen. Still whole. Still his.

He took a small black marker and wrote *LEFT* on the heel. Ritual. Comedy. Precision.

The ankle joint first. He used scissors, not a blade. Cut along the top of the foot, severing skin like he was opening a letter he didn't want to read.

The toes came off cleanly, one by one. He dropped them into a metal cup. They landed with soft ticks, like dice in a gambler's palm.

The patient screamed once. Short. A yelp, really. Then bit down hard on the rubber wedge.

The hobo didn't pause.

He dug into the arch, peeled back the skin, exposed the tendons. White cords. Beautiful.

"Delicate work," he murmured, "like threading a needle made of hurt."

He cut with patience. The sole split like an old map.

Then the knee.

He inserted a spinal blocker—crude, stolen, effective. Waited forty seconds.

Then drove a blade into the medial side and traced the curve around the patella.

The joint opened like a flower in reverse.

He scraped the cartilage with a spoon. Not a medical one. Just a spoon. Bent, stained, perfect.

Blood pooled beneath the knee. Dark. Steady.
Accepting.

He stitched nothing. Just wrapped the wound
tight. Injected antibiotics. Added a blood
thinner. Inserted a drainage tube.

He leaned close to the victim's ear and
whispered, "Four down."

No reply. Just wet breath.

He stood, stretched his back. Outside, the snow
came sideways. He stepped out, arms wide, let
it coat his face.

"Tomorrow's the nose," he said to no one.
"Always the nose on the fifth day. Like Dolcino."

He boiled snow into water. Cleaned his tools.
Laid them out to dry on a flat stone like relics.

The crow circled overhead. The dog never
came.

He didn't sleep that night. He just sat. Watching the tent. Watching the shape inside it.

He smiled when the wind shrieked.

He was nearly done being a man.

Chapter 15

The fifth morning came blue.
Not metaphorically.
Blue, like bruises. Blue, like frostbite. Blue, like things that don't bleed anymore.

He lit no fire. Drank no water. Ate nothing.

He opened the tent and stood inside the doorway for a full minute, just watching the body.

It breathed.

Not evenly.

But it still breathed. That was enough.

The skin was mottled. Gums grey. Eyes yellow.

The flesh of the arms had swollen beneath their bindings. The right leg twitched like it wanted to flee.

He knelt beside the head.

“Today,” he said, “is facial architecture. Nose work. Sculptural day. Very classical.”

He brushed the man's hair back. Clumps came away. Scalp oozed where the roots tore loose. He wiped it with alcohol and let the fumes rise. The other man moaned—quiet, sloppy, hopeless.

“Dolcino,” the hobo whispered. “You know that name? No? Good. He was a mistake. This will be better. Cleaner.”

He straddled the chest. Took a short, wide-bladed knife. Held it like a pencil.

He gripped the nose at the bridge. Squeezed until the cartilage popped. Then sliced downward. Clean. A letter opener through damp paper.

Blood shot up. Thin and arterial.

He clamped it with gauze, then dug into the base—worked the soft tissue, the septum, the anchor points. He peeled the skin off the nasal bone like a glove.

The patient bucked. Screamed. Tried to scream.

The hobo let him.

He held the bloody stub up to the light and whistled. “Very modernist. Brutalist, even.”

He cauterized the wound with a hot iron pulled from the coals outside the tent. Pressed it flat to the face until the body stopped jerking.

When he lifted it, the wound hissed like cooked meat. The smell clung to his tongue.

He stood. Walked out into the snow. Dropped the nose onto a rock and watched it steam. Then kicked it off the cliff.

“Dolcino never got the recycling right.”

He returned to the tent. Injected a sedative. Not to ease pain—just to stop the spasms. Then taped the man’s mouth shut. He’d screamed enough. Today was art, not music.

He sat cross-legged in front of the flap and drew a picture in the dirt with a stick:
A face with no nose.

A man with no face.

A mountain with no peak.

The crow landed beside him and coughed. It didn't caw. It coughed.

He nodded. "Halfway."

The wind picked up. It tasted like ash.

He laid down, eyes open.

Tomorrow, it would be the cock.

Chapter 16

The wind screamed all night like something being skinned.

He didn't sleep.

He sharpened instead. First the scalpel. Then the scissors. Then his nails, one by one, with a matchbox striker.

At dawn, he boiled water. Washed his face.
Brushed his teeth with a rag soaked in vinegar.
Looked at himself in a shard of mirror: cracked
lips, black gums, eyes red around the edges. He
smiled. A real one.

Then he opened the tent.

The body inside had pissed itself. The fluid had
frozen in patches, turned the sleeping bag into
a soft, glistening tomb. The man's eyes were
open. Staring. But not seeing.

He checked the IV. Still going. Heart rate?
Faint, but present.
He clapped twice. The body flinched. Good.

He sat beside it. Lit a cigarette. Blew smoke into
the canvas ceiling.

"Today," he said, "is personal."

He removed the lower restraints. Peeled back the soaked layers. Exposed the groin. Pale. Shrinking. Cold.

He slapped it once. Lightly. “Don’t retreat. We’re not done.”

Then he injected a local anesthetic. Waited. Hummed. Watched the pupil dilation.

He took the penis in his left hand. Lifted it like a relic. With the right, he made a clean cut at the base of the shaft. One stroke. No hesitation. The blade passed through like silk.

The scream that came wasn’t human. It started as a wail, collapsed into a wet gurgle, then rose again into a long, thin shriek that burned the throat on its way out.

The hobo cauterized the base with a heated clamp. Flesh sizzled. The body convulsed. Blood misted against the canvas.

He dropped the severed piece into a tin cup. Stirred it with a stick. Then flung it into the snow.

He sat back, rolled his neck. “Dolcino had the right idea. Just lacked finesse.”

He injected a sedative. Not mercy—*maintenance*.

He cleaned the wound. Packed it with antibiotic paste. Tied gauze around the groin like a ritual diaper.

Then he left the tent.

The crow was waiting. On the tent pole. It tilted its head.

He nodded. “Tomorrow’s the last.”

He looked down the mountain. Grey, then white, then blur. Somewhere far below, the world still believed in things like justice and accident.

Up here, it was just the truth.

He poured boiling water into the snow and watched it vanish. Then sat beside the tent and whispered to the wind:

“One more day. One more fire.”

He didn't sleep.

He didn't eat.

He just waited.

Chapter 17

He started before dawn. No words. No humming. No rituals. Just the mechanical rhythm of hands that already know what to do.

He stripped the tent. Pulled the body out like luggage.

It didn't resist. It couldn't. It was alive, but only technically. Heart beating because chemistry said so. Brain firing because he hadn't yet *let* it stop.

He dragged it twenty meters from the ridge, where the slope dipped into a bowl of stone and silence.

There, he had stacked wood the week before. Quietly. Patiently. Like building a crib. Birch, pine, and blackthorn. Layered tight. Dry. He tested it with a match. The flame jumped. Good.

He laid the body on top. Face up. What was left of it.

No words. No speech. No last look.

He set the IV to drip faster—saline, glucose, a cocktail of stimulants and clotters. He needed him alive. Until the fire chose otherwise.

He wrapped the body in one final layer—canvas soaked in ethanol and pine sap. It clung like skin.

He lit it from beneath. One match. One corner. The flame crawled at first. Then surged. It found the sap. Then the fat. Then the nerves.

He stepped back. Watched.

The body arched once. Soundless. The mouth opened. Smoke poured out before voice.

Then it screamed.

The sound cut through the snow like a crack in the sky. Birds fled. The crow didn't move. It sat nearby, watching.

The fire climbed. Hair went first. Then eyes. Then the skin split along the sternum with a pop like boiled fruit.

He didn't flinch.
He just stood.
Hands in his coat.

The snow hissed as it melted around the pyre. Steam rose like breath from the mountain itself.

After a while, the screaming stopped.

He watched until the ribcage collapsed. Until the limbs curled in like roots. Until the body wasn't a body anymore. Just shape. Just smoke.

Then he turned.

He walked to the ridge. Didn't look back.

The man walked away, eyes forward. The sparks cracked in the dry wood, and rose through the tent like stars piercing the clear sky.

A relentless journey through absence, obsession, and the anatomy of pursuit.

A man walks. Across abandoned rail lines, into derelict towns, through snow, fog, and silence. He follows another man—always just behind, always too late. He collects traces: an apple core, a burnt match, a forgotten sock. He moves without haste, without rest, driven not by rage or reason, but by something deeper. Ritual. Compulsion. Destiny.

As Seen By the Colomber is a stark, unflinching descent into the mind of the pursuer. Told with forensic precision and poetic restraint, Alba Pratalia's novel explores what happens when the act of following becomes a way of being. Each chapter is a step further into solitude, madness, and purpose sharpened to a scalpel's edge.

With echoes of Buzzati, Cormac McCarthy, and the existential horror of a world stripped of metaphor, this is a novel of remarkable control and devastating clarity. You will not forget the walker. You will not forget the walk.

The Guardian

"A study in pursuit that becomes an autopsy of the soul."

The Times (London)

"More than a novel: a ritual, a wound, a liturgy of silence and frost."

The Boston Globe

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The Los Angeles Times

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